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BOMBARDED

BY CICELY HAMILTON

It was a town that had grown with the ages, and the mark of the ages was upon it; you lost yourself easily in the curving streets that followed the course of old waterways long dry, old ramparts long levelled with the ground. The ramparts and waterways were gone, but they had moulded the city to their shape, forcing those who dwelt there to tread in the footsteps of their fathers; and though modernities, in the shape of railway lines and a factory or two, had established themselves on its spreading outskirts, the heart and core was old France—old provincial France, individual and Picard; an entity the centuries had made and fashioned and whose like no future, whatever its splendor, shall bring forth. If it lies in ruins it dies utterly; a successor may be born to it, may rise on its ashes, may bear its name and flourish exceedingly; but to make it what it was would need the trick of vanished hands and the vision of dead men's eyes.

If it dies, it is not Rheims or Amiens, and there will be no great clamor over its death; those who knew it will grieve, those who drew their sustenance from it will be ruined, but to such of the outside world who hear of the fact its importance will be purely the importance of an incident of war. It is one of the many quiet glories of France whose charm, in the old days, its children took for granted and the ordinary tourist passed by; and if its fate has any interest to those not immediately concerned, it is only because it is typical and is dying as other towns have died.

It had been said among us that some day it must certainly come; there were reasons, strategical and obvious, why the period of immunity that had lasted since the early days of the war must shortly be drawing to an end. Yet even while we said so, we lived as we had always lived, in the

security that comes of custom, and, native and alien, military and civilian, we went on with our several businesses. The market was weekly spread in the shadow of the church, the peasant-farmer chaffered and sold at a profit, the shop-keeper and innkeeper filled their pockets, and in the offices of military departments the typewriter clicked and the clerk filed his documents as usual. On the hills above the town you could hear the guns insistent at the front, that in the last few weeks had drawn nearer; but the hills above the town broke the sound to the dwellers in the hollow, and it was only at night, when the town was very still, that you could catch the echo of a drumming that never was silent. So we lived very steadily and, I think, for the most part without fear.

The first alarm crashed oddly out through music; perhaps in the town the promised signal had been sounded, but we, in the concert-hall, had not heard it. Halfway through the programme was the item "Pianoforte Solos"; whereof (a) was the Chopin Nocturne in C Sharp Minor and (b) the Chopin Waltz in A Flat. The studio adjoining our dwelling-house, which we had transformed into a concert-room and miniature theatre, was filled with its customary audience; officers, for the most part employed in the town, with a sprinkling of others passing through from the trenches and towards them, and a lesser sprinkling of women. Here and there was a blue French tunic and here and there a French civilian, conspicuous amongst the many uniforms. . . . The Waltz in A Flat was unplayed that night; the Nocturne in C Sharp Minor was not yet at an end when the anti-aircraft thudded and the first bombs fell on the town. For an instant the melody wavered as the clamor of conflict broke out; then, steadying itself, it flowed evenly on and was quietly audible above the thud of the batteries, the shaking of the windows, and the savage knocker-rap of the machine-guns. It was said to me afterwards that the girl who played on evenly was foolish; as the sides of the building were largely of glass, it should, at the first alarm, have been cleared of its audience; but the critic himself spoke admiringly of her foolishness and when the nocturne had reached its end the applause rang out cheerfully and loud. Then came a moment's hesitation—some moving, some uncertain what to do; till, after someone entered with orders to put out all lights, we rose and streamed out from the hall. That, though we

knew it not, was the last concert destined to be held there; in a day or two more the little hall was a windowless ruin.

The raid that night was even as every other raid: a long waiting while the double-noted engines droned, while the batteries thundered from the hills around, and every now and then the house shivered as a bomb struck a nearby mark. Once we thought the ordeal ended and came out into the open—to hear the nearing drone of a second onslaught and retreat once more behind our walls. Some chose the cellars and others held stubbornly to sitting-rooms—where tea might be brewed and pretence made of carrying on as usual. . . . In the end a silence that lasted, the grave, windless silence of night, and the air, as we came to it, sulphurous and heavy with dust. The night being windless, the dust hung, a haze above the ground; and through it came suddenly a man who, knowing me, caught at my arm.

“The office has gone—J., all of them. They told me not to tell you—there’s a bomb right through——”

As he ran he flung back something more about the police not letting us through, but there was no one to stay us as we made our way down the short street that led to the ruin. At the end of it broken glass, fallen tiles and beams, and figures moving through the darkness—and the first I ran against was one of those I had gathered was dead. Of the news that had sickened me this much only was true—the rear of the building had been wrecked. Half a dozen houses adjoining were in ruin and ruin absolute; a torpedo had brought them crumbling to the ground and there were dead men enough beneath the rubble; but those I knew and feared for had escaped unhurt since the front of their office had stood. We groped about the wreckage and talked of their escape—inadequately. . . . As we walked back the silence was like clean, cool water; the dust-haze had settled and one side of the street was silver-grey in moonlight, the other side in sharp-cut velvet shadow. As with all old towns, the moonlight was gracious to this one.

With the morning the extent of the damage was made visible; and as the next sun went down there began the nightly exodus. Even those the least learned in military matters knew the reason why their town was a bait and a target for the enemy; knew also that other towns, a few miles off, had already been harried to the desertion point. And the place was not large enough to hide its wounds; every man

was near neighbor to some ruin wrought and feared to be nearer yet; thus with the falling of night the houses emptied themselves and were locked and left to their silence, while the owners trailed out along the roads. Some found lodging in the neighboring villages, and some, when the neighboring villages were filled, lay and slept under hedges or in patches of the frequent woodland. On the second night rumor had it that "they" tried again and were forced to turn back by a barrage a few miles away; on the third night they defied and eluded the barrage and again there was havoc in the town. On that night it was that our concert-hall went and a bomb exploded in our courtyard; so that the next day we wrestled unceasingly with the incursions of the French small boy—who, armed with knives and other piercing instruments, made free of our dwelling and the holes in its walls, that he might extract therefrom fragments of metal to be treasured in his pockets as souvenirs.

No war, I suppose, save this, has seen what you then might see nightly: the regular desertion and emptying of a city, its abandonment as dusk came down. In the old wars men fled into walled towns for refuge from their enemy; in our wars the wall, when the night comes down, is a trap that you fly from to the open. Thus with sunset the town scattered forth its inhabitants, sent them broadcast to north and to south; carts crawled out of it and motors sped, and at the side of the road was the endless procession afoot. Here and there came a column of soldiers tramping orderly out of the danger zone; the emigration was organized as well as voluntary, and there remained in the place only those who were kept there by duty. From some among these came a pathetic request for the loan of a cellar we no longer required—they having no refuge of their own.

The town before ten was a dead town shuttered; a shell of abandoned homes and unslept-in beds. Suddenly and in the course of a few swift days its reason for existence had passed and it was no longer a town but a mockery. Its streets were a semblance and a counterfeit only; had they been real, men would have lived in them and gone about their business and their leisure. For the spirit of the house is the dweller therein, and without him the life has gone out of it.

The life that went nightly out of the city drifted many miles along the roads. All the countryside was scattered with men and with women who strained their ears when the

Gothas came down and the batteries fought for their homes; who lay on the hills and watched the wheeling of the searchlight and, on the evil night when the dump blew up, saw a valley aglow with flame; who peered from beneath hedges and through windows of cottages, and wondered what morning and the journey home would reveal to them. All the moonlit country was alive with hidden watchers; beneath the outward and silver peace of it was the listening and peering of the hunted who had fled in fear from their dwellings. . . . That, I think, in great part, was what made these nights so dreadful: the sense of an unseen audience that listened while the enemy tore at its homes, of a ring of unseen eyes that watched the town fight for its life. And when the last droning died and a church bell rang "All Clear" it was as if the first thought of the ancient little city was to call greeting and assurance to the sons who had been witness to her agony.

One night when, for three endless hours, the raid had gone over us, a healthy young Englishwoman, when the blessed silence came, volunteered that she was pleased to have been there. "All this, it's an experience," she commented briskly, "something that we shall always be glad to remember, something you can say you've seen." Whereat she said good-night and composed herself to sleep beneath her tree—while I lay without words beneath mine. She was a nice young woman, not apparently stupid, and there are, as I know, many like her—persons to whom it will be a source of gratification in years to come that they looked on the death-throes of an ancient town, heard beauty crumbled into shapeless ruin and peered down from the hills while men died: whose consciousness on such a night is bounded by their own sensations; who see the flashes with their eyes only and hear the thunder only with their ears; so that from them is hidden the suspense of those whose all is threatened and the torment of those who sit in darkness. It is well, I suppose, that this unthinking indifference should exist, since it makes, in its way, for steady nerves; yet on the night when the young woman had her "experience" and rejoiced at it there were men who crawled out of trenches, alive they knew not why, and trembled when you spoke to them suddenly. And there were others who waited outside a magazine and warned off the reckless who would shelter there and share their own peril; and yet others in hospital, incapable of movement and

helpless. . . . Of these, and such as these, it is well not to think if experience is to be dwelt on complacently and chattered of glibly hereafter; for the thought of these things hangs round a man's bed o' nights and takes away his pleasure in the memory of his own adventures.

Is it strange or only to be expected that this simple and unashamed pleasure in the spectacle of horror should be met with chiefly in women? Almost solely, perhaps—for I have never yet come across a man who gave voice to it, while in women, young women, it is frequent and openly expressed. I remember—one of very many instances—how some girls once told me, with bright satisfaction, that they had walked amongst the graves of a battlefield and the "experience" had given them a thrill. Whereat, for the moment, I hated them frankly—having lately stood by a Breton mother who howled like a dog for her dead. A failure in development somewhere, this incapacity to see except with the bodily eye, to link up happening and consequence. Yet those who possess it are happy—though one would not share their happiness.

There is another species of imperviousness to surroundings, equally unthinking and equally unimaginative, which, far from repelling attracts; in part because it manifests itself with unconscious humor, in part because those who possess the quality are in no wise, like the seeker for experience, on the track of a personal gain. About the seeker after experience is a touch of the profiteer who gains by others' miseries—and worse than the profiteer, the ghoul; the other type is merely the steady-nerved, the creature of civilized habit, who insists on continuing as usual. Of such was the private who had hung out his washing on the evening before our worst raid, and who, the next morning, with ruin around him, insisted on claiming a visitor's sympathy for a clothes-line blown Heaven knew where. And of such was the woman who, while shrapnel burst and the Gotha droned, while the valley below her was aleap with flame, strode up and down an impromptu camp demanding vigorously a flannel nightgown which had strayed on its journey from the town. . . . These and such as these are a joy and an encouragement; a reminder that life was lived peaceably once and may be lived peaceably again.

In the day the town filled again partially—in a measure,

for the purpose of emptying; for as one raid followed another the number of refugees swelled. It was not only at nightfall that windows were shuttered; every day there were houses that slept on and did not reopen, houses whence carts and lorries had moved off with loads of bedding and furniture. Shops closed, hotels closed; you went out to buy some oddment, were faced by a blank window and returned home empty-handed. The town had been the center for local trade and in the villages round you heard anxious talk of the difficulties ahead in the way of sale and replenishment.

Here and there the emigration was helped by the military; by the French army lorry and by groups of Portuguese grey-clad, smiling fellows, very active and helpful with carts. Through one door after another came the household goods of a family—the mattresses, the linen and the odds and ends of furniture—to be loaded up on the waiting vehicle and lumber off westward or southward. Many, less fortunate, went only with what they could carry; and to the aid of those who needs must stay came the Chinamen of the Labor Companies, stripped to the waist and their brown bodies glistening in the sunlight—chatting cheerfully and incomprehensibly as they dug zigzag trenches in the open spaces of the town. There was something more than incongruous about their cheerfulness and alien indifference; yet what should it matter to these men of the East that a little western town lay a-dying?

In counting the sorrows that have fallen upon France one must remember that her people, for the most part, have no wandering instinct in their blood; various causes, temperamental, economic, have made of them a race that roots stubbornly. A race that plans forward, that builds and saves and stints; that has little careless trust in the future, in the haphazard turn of events. That holds to what it has and improves it unadventurously but steadily; a race, in the provinces especially, of small owners, small landholders, small shopkeepers. With such the roots are driven deep into the soil, are entwined about the house they seldom move from; for which reason the towns in which they and their fathers have dwelt have a lasting individuality unknown with more emigrant races. And for the same reason, I make no doubt that when they are driven forth by the chances of war their suffering is greater than that of a people as instinctively emigrant as ourselves. To the Frenchman, home is in very

truth an abiding-place, and the unknown and unsettled future a greater dread than with us. Always I shall remember the dulled, tight-lipped faces of the older women of the town; of one, in particular, who stared through the splintered windows of the little shop that was her home, not seeming to hear while I stumbled out my sympathy, resentful and silent in her hopelessness. The little shop and the rooms behind it had been life and the world to herself and her husband for years. . . . None of them were emotional outwardly; but their mouths and their eyes were despairing.

An Englishman, a private soldier, once said to me, speaking of the Frenchman as he knew him, that he was more patriotic than ourselves; and he asked how I accounted for the difference. I answered, I remember, that the Frenchman's country had suffered more than ours in past wars and that therefore he loved it better. It was an answer given without much thinking, but I understood how right it was when some months later I saw death threaten a town. For it was as if transfigured by the shadow—and for a stranger who had known it less than a year. I had always been friendly to its winding streets and its churches; but to see it wounded, assailed, and deserted, was to understand something of that love for a city which wrought in the mind of Dante, and to know that there are deeps in a man's soul which are only stirred by the suffering of the thing beloved. Lying out on the hillside one red and wicked night, it seemed to me that I understood, by what I saw and felt, why London, for all her greatness and her dear familiar beauty, does not satisfy her Londoners as Paris does her Parisians. For if the pride of Paris has been higher than the pride of London, her humiliation has been deeper; she gives more to her sons than her majesty and pleasure—she gives them the memory of her sorrows.

If I am right in this, there are today many wasted regions, many maimed and shattered cities, to whose suffering at least is granted this one compensation: it has added immeasurably to the love of their children, has made it passionate and conscious and turned even indifference into longing. So that towns that have been broken will be treasured for the riches that have fled them—and loved for the beauty they have lost.

CICELY HAMILTON.